Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision
Vegetation, Timber, and Fire #2
May 11, 2015
South Fork, CO
Meeting Summary

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Kevin Duda, Dale Gomez, Adam Mendonca, Erin Minks, Henry Provencio
- *Peak Facilitation*: Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 15 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss vegetation, timber, and fire on the RGNF. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform and influence the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan Revision and Assessment Process

Adam Mendonca, Deputy Supervisor of the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself and explained the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15 to 20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps expected to be completed by 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan.

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Specialist of the Rio Grande National Forest, explained the assessment questions that were the focus of the meeting and discussed factors that could affect forest health. He also talked about how humans rely on the RGNF and posed the question of how to find a sustainable use of forest resources. Mr. Blakeman brought up the history of fire on the RGNF and asked the public to think about how this will affect the development and use of the forest in the future. He stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public can also provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Map-based Discussion

Attendees participated in a map-based discussion to denote areas where forest conditions are good and should be maintained, where they could be a concern in the future, and where they are a current concern.

-GREEN - Areas with good conditions that should be maintained	
Natural Regeneration	• Fern G has good natural regeneration, especially at lower elevations. • Upper Pinos Creek – Crystal Lake has natural regeneration post-timber harvest.
Additional Areas	• Lower Middle Creek Road forests at low and mid elevations are good. • Ivy/Lime Creek benefits from grazing in reducing herbaceous plant cover and helping to establish seedlings. • Silverthread between Wagonwheel Gap and South Fork is good.
-ORANGE- Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement	
Dead Trees	• Pinos Creek has emerging issues with dead trees that pose a safety risk and offer an opportunity to harvest timber. • Beaver – Poage has emerging issues with dead trees and offers an opportunity to harvest timber.
Additional Areas	• Bennett Creek beaver dams could cause concern for large washout of road. • Sangre de Cristos have insects and disease that are causing a decline in vegetative vigor and could possibly be solved by use of pheromones.
-RED - Areas with current concerns	
Dead Trees	• Bachelor Loop is unsafe due to dead trees. • Seepage Trail is unsafe due to dead trees. • Bristol Head in unsafe due to dead trees and is an opportunity for timber harvest. • Along Highway 149 from Willow Creek to Forest boundary is at risk for fire, unless dead trees are removed to promote regeneration. • Del Norte Peak is unsafe due to dead trees and is an opportunity for timber harvest. • Upper half of Miners Creek has an issue with dead trees. • Fox Mountain has an issue with dead trees and is an opportunity for timber harvest. • Upper La Garita Creek is a high multi-use area with dead trees and is an opportunity to harvest. • Upper Alder – Palisade trail system is compromised due to dead trees. • Wolf Creek Ski Area and Thunder/Hart Mountain has an issue with dead trees due to concentrated winter use with an opportunity to remove timber in a way that makes the area more aesthetically pleasing and improves backcountry uses.

Assessment Questions

Forest Health and Sustainability

What is the definition of a healthy forest?

Qualities of a Healthy Forest	• Green Trees • Wildlife • Plants and Flowers • Erosion • Variety of age classes of trees • Defends itself against disease • Live vegetation, animals, and insects • Natural regeneration • Sustainable for current human use • Diversity of vegetation in type and age • Self-regulating water quality
Qualities of an Unhealthy Forest	• Burned Trees • Bugs • Erosion • Overgrowth

What is a sustainable use of the forest?

Recreation	• Hunt and fish in order to maintain proper population levels. • Maintain multi-use recreation of the forest. • Listen to the Forest Service as a guideline of proper and improper use.
Logging	• Remove diseased or unhealthy trees. • Harvest trees at a sustainable rate where natural regeneration is possible. • Decrease harvest levels when high rates of removal are no longer necessary. • Harvest trees while still economically viable. • Sustain economics of industry and the forest.
Management Practices	• Develop quantitative data to define long-term sustainable use. • Set a limit on future timber harvest after initial salvage period. • Deter overgrazing with utilization standards.

Impacts of Human Activities

What are impacts of human activities on the forest?

Human Activities	• Recreation • Firewood collection • Mining • Grazing • Timber Harvest
Impacts of Logging	• Impacts are positive or negative depending on integrity of practice. • Erosion can increase in logging areas. • Scarification affects the ecosystem and future use. • Job creation benefits the economy and creates opportunity. • Logging companies maintain high quality of roads. • Logging increases soil compaction. • Logging should be avoided in high-use recreation areas.

Impacts of Access	• Logging access roads with multiple uses will continue to be beneficial after harvesting has ended. • Multi-use roads and trails promote economic sustainability. • Access points should be developed in advance of need to develop opportunities for limited resources in the future. • Cattle and ATV usage advance erosion.
Impacts of Recreation	• Loop trails disperse usage and improve visitor experience. • ATVs can cause erosion. • Increased recreation increases trash. • Impacts of recreation are positive or negative depending on integrity of use. • Hunting can have negative impacts if proper game retrieval is not enforced. • Motorized users do not always stay on proper trails and follow rules. • Campgrounds are overcrowded because of increased recreation usage.
Impacts of Grazing	• Impacts of grazing can be positive if done properly. • Bad grazing practice decrease water quality. • Erosion can increase in areas with high levels of cattle grazing. • Grazing positively affects ecological resources on the forest. • Economic benefits of grazing are important.
Additional Comments	• Address the abuses of motorized use in the plan. • Keep ATV trails open. • Maintain current conditions of timber roads by Park Creek.

Fuels and Fire on the Forest

How should the Forest Service handle standing dead timber on the RGNF?
Should fire be used as a tool for management?

Dead Timber on the Forest	• Timber must be economically viable to remove from the forest. • Dead timber is not always financially viable due on environmental conditions. • Standing dead timber is not always accessible. • Individual firewood collection can be used to remove dead standing timber. • Dead trees should be left on the ground to let nature take care of them.
Management Practices	• Logging is less harmful to the environment than forest fires. • Logging is less expensive for the Forest Service than fighting forest fires. • Existing access points and roads should be used to access timber. • Forest Service should use proactive, adaptive, and hands-on management. • Roads should remain open after use for ease of future sales and use. • Existing transportation systems benefit future firefighting efforts. • Current logging roads should be managed in a way that benefits other users.
Use of Fire	• Prescriptive fire is OK and can be an effective management tool. • Prescribed burns can be OK under certain environmental conditions. • Wildfires are more damaging to the environment than prescribed burns. • All wildfires should be put out immediately. • Wildfires should be allowed to burn if they are under control. • Fires can be very dangerous in areas affected by beetle kill.

Standards and Guidelines

Standards and guidelines are the "rules of the forest" that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

Standard (Wildlife #16) – Allow uneven-aged timber management only if the resulting timber stand contains necessary habitat components for native and desirable non-native species.

Keep Standard	• Invigorate growth of Aspen trees. • Mimic natural disturbance patters with mechanical prescriptions, clear cut, and group selections by cover type.
Change Standard	• Current conditions are not within natural range of variations. • Use uneven age management to keep age diversity in Ponderosa Pine. • Use all tools to manage within natural range of variation. • Use select harvest prescriptions for mixed conifer. • Change this to a guideline.

Guideline (Fire #2) – Develop and implement a prescribed-fire program, both management ignited and prescribed natural, which addresses the ecosystem needs and values at risk of the entire forest.
Guideline (Fire #3) – Initial attack response will be planned and designated based on the values at risk and the cost of suppression.

Keep Guidelines	• Continue to use prescribed fires. • Consider property values and watershed when using prescribed fire. • Expand areas of prescribed fire on steep slopes when possible. • Suppress fire where there is robust regeneration in Spruce-Fur ecosystems. • Consider fuels conditions and values at risk.
Change Guidelines	• Use mechanical thinning in wildlife-urban interface and sensitive watersheds. • Use mechanical harvest in green and dead forests to prevent future fires. • Consider tourists and recreation when deciding to use prescribed fire. • Consider recreation access when using prescribed and mechanical thinning. • Suppress all fires in order to keep costs lower. • Do not allow cost be the driving force behind fire-related decisions.
Additional Comments	• Consider soils when deciding the use of fire. • Consider firefighter and public safely when making decisions to use fire.

Guideline (Insect and Disease #2) – Control natural insect and disease outbreaks in Wilderness only when justified by predicted loss of resource values outside of Wilderness.

Keep Guideline	• Use management practices (e.g., fire, logging, pheromones) to control insects, • Increase forest health. • Use adaptive management to control bugs and disease. • Treat insect outbreaks aggressively.
Change Guideline	• Do not limit language to only Wilderness. • Increase resilience of existing, healthy, tree stands. • Acquire more funding to deal with insects and disease outbreaks. • Increase diversity of existing, healthy, tree stands.

Additional Comments

- Create more guidelines and fewer standards.
- Capitalize on the value of dead trees.
- Incorporate more flexibility into the standards and guidelines.

Questions

What determines how much logging is done on the forest?

"Regulated timber harvest activities will occur on only those lands classified as "Suitable" and "Scheduled" for timber production…. On Unsuitable or Suitable but not Scheduled lands, limited timber cutting may occur for such purposes as salvage, protection or enhancement of biodiversity or wildlife habitat, scenic-resource management, or to perform research or administrative studies consistent with Management Area direction." (Rio Grande Forest plan 1996) Additionally; a model to calculate the Allowable Sale Quantity, referred to as the ASQ, is used to determine how much timber can be sold each year, for the life of the plan. The ASQ will be recalculated during forest plan revision. Typically, economic conditions are the limiting factor in how much timber is offered on a forest, however, with the spruce beetle epidemic that has occurred on the Rio Grande, the forest budget allocation is the current limiting factor.